

MINUTES
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BOARD OF SELECTMEN
SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 4, 2006
SPECIAL SESSION
COMMUNITY ROOM, CHENERY MIDDLE SCHOOL
8:00 AM

Call to Order

A special meeting of the Board of Selectmen was called to order in open session at 8:03 AM on Saturday, February 4, 2006 in the Community Room of the Chenery Middle School. All members were present. Town Administrator Tom Younger, Assistant Town Administrator Jeff Conti, Town Accountant Barbara Hagg, and members of the Warrant Committee were also present.

Chairman Solomon introduced Jeff Hansel, the new director of the Belmont Media Center.

FY07 BUDGET HEARINGS – DEPARTMENTS

Community Development/Planning

Community Development Director Glenn Clancy and Planning and Economic Development Director Jay Szklut appeared before the Board.

Mr. Clancy explained that the Community Development office is responsible for all engineering, building, and planning projects as well as road reconstruction. He stated he needs a staff person he can delegate responsibility to and who can supervise and run the department when he is absent. We have made changes in the way we do things that have improved efficiency and response time. But there remains a delay in the permitting process because he is too busy with other duties to sign off on building permits as quickly as he should. Also, we are being asked to step up enforcement in areas like signage and snow removal. He is unable to give the Conservation Commission as much support as he feels he should be. For all these reasons, he needs an Assistant Director and requests that this position be funded. We have included this in the level services budget but it is not in the reduced services budget.

Under reduced services, the department will take a \$30,000 hit in its professional services account. This includes the mowing of Rock Meadow, and most of it is for unforeseen expenses that come up with building projects, such as a structural analysis of the barn that we inherited from McLean, the engineering and surveying for the Woodfall Road project, and consulting fees for the Pleasant Street reconstruction. We used some of this money in FY06 to hire a consultant who helped us get a \$125,000 grant from MWRA.

In the planning budget, we are also proposing to eliminate \$15,000 in the professional services account. Mr. Szklut said that we have funded consultants for re-zoning efforts. We are looking at some economic redevelopment efforts in the business districts and these will require design guidelines which our staff does not have the time or ability to do. Sometimes there are legal services required along with a project review. Even for level service, we are asking for \$213,116 which is not even \$2,000 more than what we spent in FY04.

Mr. Younger said that the Assistant Director position will be one of the first things he will attempt to restore with additional state aid coming in, along with the Youth Commission and the rent for the Senior Center – this would use up about \$200,000 out of the \$700,000 in additional revenue that has been identified.

Mr. Clancy said that the Conservation Commission has been struggling to maintain Rock Meadow. They have been able to put a dollar figure on bringing the meadow back to its previous condition as a usable open space. So we are asking for \$10,800 in level services for mowing and maintenance, invasive species control. This is for the first year of a multi-year effort.

The Board asked if there are private groups that could fundraise for this. Mr. Clancy said that the Conservation Committee has done that this year but feels we need a more stable funding source to take care of this town-owned land.

Mr. Clancy went on to note that the department has been hiring a college intern to scan its plans so they can be stored electronically. This costs about \$5,000 per year and we feel it is a very important effort with the ultimate goal of incorporating the scanned plans into the GIS system.

Warrant Committee member Ralph Jones stated that given all the responsibilities of the department and the things we expect to come up over the next year, the reduced services budget for this department is under-funded.

The Board asked if the proposal to create a \$3 million roads account were to go through, would you be able to administer this under the level services budget? Mr. Clancy said he felt confident that this could be done, particularly because under that scenario we would have the Assistant Director position.

Warrant Committee member Dianne Hobbs asked if the Assistant Director's role could be handled by contracted consultants so as to save on health and retirement benefits. Mr. Clancy responded that the role is so diverse he does not see how you would do that efficiently. Having someone in-house allows you to ask them to work on any number of different things at the same time.

Warrant Committee member Jim Heigham noted that the Assistant Director position is essential especially given the plan to do the roads. This department used to have a larger staff. Zoning amendments we should be able to do without hiring consultants.

Selectman Brownsberger said there is a lot of value in having an in-house full time employee with continuity and institutional knowledge.

Chairman Solomon noted that the responsibilities of this department are vast. We have received comments from businesses that the permitting process just takes too long. Can this be streamlined in the near future?

Mr. Clancy replied that we have already made some improvements. We are getting different departments together to meet with applicants to try to make for one-stop shopping for the applicant.

Selectman Brownsberger added that this sort of issue gets back to why we need an Assistant Director.

Warrant Committee member Geof Tillotson asked how the Uplands 40B project will affect the Planning Department?

Mr. Szklut answered that it will take up a lot of his time. It's difficult to foresee exactly what studies or reviews may be requested by the ZBA as the process moves forward. Hopefully the developer will pay for a lot of these.

Selectman Brownsberger asked if additional personnel would be helpful beyond what is being requested in the level services budget. Mr. Clancy said he thought that having the engineer and the Assistant Director as in the level services budget would be just fine.

Selectman Firenze said he is fully supportive of the Assistant Director position, whether it be an in-house or contracted position. He also supports the professional services money in the level services budget request, but would rather see the \$10,800 for Rock Meadow reassigned and that need addressed privately.

Buildings

Buildings and Facilities Manager Kevin Looney appeared before the Board of Selectmen.

Mr. Looney stated that his department supports all the services the Town provides. It was created in 1999 to centralize as many services as we could to raise efficiency and save money. When we have to fix something that is not covered by a maintenance contract, it gets expensive. New areas that we are now in charge of include the phone system and the postage.

We have a number of new buildings and they need to be maintained. Maintaining the Homer Building is more expensive than maintaining the old annex building. With more

new buildings coming, our costs are going to go up. It is hard to get a handle on utilities costs for the new fire stations, for example. We cannot control fuel costs or electricity costs.

Warrant Committee member Robie White noted that this department covers a broad range of activities for a four-person department. Their challenges have been exacerbated because we have brought on new buildings without looking carefully at what their operating costs would be. Mr. White said he thinks this department should be consolidated together with a larger department and the Building Consolidation Committee is looking at this.

Mr. Looney said that under the reduced services budget, we would have to cut back on cleaning the buildings and try to pick up some of the difference with our own staff or ask the departments to clean their own spaces. We also do not know what is happening with the senior center. If we move them to the trailers there would be about a \$10,000 operating cost to maintain them in that location. He noted that we have got to do a better job designing new buildings that are less expensive to maintain.

Selectman Firenze added that these inefficiencies may be small but they send a bad message to the community that we are wasting money.

Mr. Tillotson pointed out that we do not have an operating cost estimate from the Senior Center and he does not want to be here in two years having the same conversation about that building.

Mr. Younger said that we are trying to make sure all the appropriate departments are consulted and we have an operating cost estimate for the new Senior Center before the shovel goes into the ground.

Mr. Looney discussed the value of having a project manager for building projects (as we do for the Senior Center.)

Selectman Brownsberger asked Mr. Looney if he has enough under level services to do the job.

Mr. Looney answered, minimally. He finds himself always in reactive mode and not in pro-active mode.

Warrant Committee member Jim Fitzgerald said that the facilities audit and other reports have made recommendations – if we had implemented them we would have saved millions. We need to start addressing some of these maintenance issues.

The Board recessed at 9:46 AM for a five-minute break and reconvened at 9:58 AM.

Public Works

DPW Director Peter Castanino, Highway Director Mike Santoro, Assistant Water Superintendent Mike Bishop and Cemetery Director Bob Gardiner appeared before the Board.

Mr. Castanino reported to the Board that we have been able to increase efficiency and avoid costs since we consolidated these departments under public works. We are consolidating administrative and business functions in a new business manager position which was budgeted for last year but has not been filled. This will be filled under both reduced and level services. Under reduced services we are cutting sidewalks. In level services we are asking for an additional \$14,000 for a piece of equipment to cut back brush on roadways. This is something that should be done every four or five years.

We have moved money from our supplies account to a new separate item just for road maintenance. Because we are not doing enough with pavement management, we have increased maintenance needs. We have a pothole crew out every day and asphalt costs have increased. Under reduced services, we will spend roughly the same amount on potholes as we do now, but under level services we have budgeted for another \$48,000 just to do as good a job as we have done this year.

We have grouped all the snow removal items together to make it easier to get a picture of the true cost of snow removal. We try to budget for an average winter which is about 45 inches of snow. But the true cost is based more on duration than on inches. Town Accountant Barbara Hagg added that this is one of the few accounts we can overspend as long as we budget at least as much as last year.

Mr. Castanino explained that under level service, the street lighting will go up by \$40,000 in increased electricity costs. Under reduced services we stay at what we are spending now by shutting off 25% of the street lights. For central fleet maintenance, we have an increase in health insurance costs and step wage increases. For forestry service, we have built in small increases for our tree service vendor and for a small raise for our tree warden.

Under reduced services we have had to cut part-time summer help – these people cut grass and help to maintain roadway deltas. Mr. Younger asked if we have tried an “adopt-a-delta” program. Mr. Castanino responded that we did try it and it was a miserable failure, although it seems to have been successful in other towns. The problem is that if the groups do not live up to their commitments, our people still end up doing the work.

On waste disposal, we saved \$500,000 last year when the NESWC contract ended. Our collection contracts will be fairly stable. Mr. White noted that Mr. Castanino has looked at transfer station operating costs and it does not appear now that this would represent any significant savings.

Mr. Castanino said that under reduced services, we will not be watering the grass regularly which would have an impact on the athletic fields. However, we have had to budget \$6,000 for synthetic turf maintenance and \$3,000 for a turf sweeper. It is worth

noting that the turf can be used continuously as opposed to grass. We have saved between \$4000-9000 in electricity costs at the rink with the new equipment we installed. We need to replace two hot water tanks for the zamboni and that is a capital cost of \$8,000. Mr. Younger noted that this kind of maintenance saves the town money in the long run.

Mr. Castanino reported that in the cemetery division, we are cutting overtime which would mean no Saturday burials. We have generally charged fees for Saturday burials which cover expenses and additionally generate a small amount of revenue, so we would lose that revenue. We are requesting a capital outlay of \$8000 for a lawnmower.

Water Enterprise

The MWRA assessment is going up and this is almost all of the increase in the total water budget. However, they are projecting rates going forward for five years which may help us to plan. We are in the middle of a 30 year water main replacement plan and spending about \$640,000 annually on that with about 15 miles of water main replaced so far.

Sewer Enterprise

Again here the MWRA assessment is going up and makes up almost all the increase in this budget. We are working on reducing stormwater inflow into the sewers which over time will reduce our MWRA assessment.

Mr. White said that Mr. Castanino and his staff have been very open to our goal of looking at changes that will save money. We need to look at what DPW is spending on Recreation and school facilities and try to recoup those costs. We are still looking at a transfer station and pay-as-you-throw but do not have any conclusions to offer yet. If we shut off 1/3 of the street lights, we could save \$65,000 minus the costs of doing so which are estimated at \$8000.

Warrant Committee member Mark Paolillo added that we are also studying the idea of a trash fee as distinct from pay-as-you throw.

Chairman Solomon thanked Mr. Castanino and all the department heads who have appeared for all their hard work.

The board recessed for a short break at 11:56 AM and reconvened at 12:02 PM.

Revenue Discussion

Ms. Hagg discussed some of the additions and subtractions since the original budget was prepared. The Treasurer is projecting \$350,000 in additional investment earnings. Also the Governor's budget contains \$400,000 in additional local aid. There have been some other minor cost increases for items like the Minuteman assessment. All together we are left with a deficit (assuming level services budget) of \$1.7 million, down from \$2.4 million.

There was discussion of the amount of revenue being generated by building permit fees and recreation fees, and parking fees. Mr. Younger noted that many of the fees charged by the Town are set in state law and cannot be changed. One that we can change is liquor license fees, but those are already high in Belmont compared to other towns. If you increase recreation fees too much, people turn to private programs instead.

Ms. Hagg stated that we have budgeted for a 13% increase in health insurance costs beginning in January 2007 as well as \$150,000 for coverage changes (i.e., adding a spouse.)

We are now looking at using an additional \$700,000 of free cash and transferring the \$1 million of capital money for roads into the operating budget since we would be asking for a \$3 million roads override. This would cut the budget deficit to \$21,551 which is essentially a balanced budget.

Selectman Brownsberger explained that our reserve policy states that in order to retain our bond rating we want to maintain a reserve of 10% of our operating budget. As of the end of FY05 we were actually at about 13%. Our original budget would use \$850,000 for operating expenses. We could go as high as \$2.2 million and still be consistent with our reserve policy. We are now talking about a figure of \$1.55 million (850K + 700K).

The Board asked Ms. Hagg to prepare a statement of exactly what the fund balances are now and what they would be under either option, with percentages.

The Board discussed the fact that such a drawdown would only leave \$150,000 in free cash and whether that would be enough to cover unforeseen expenses. It was agreed that there is always unexpended money in other accounts, plus the likelihood of realizing money from the sale of Woodfall Road property (usable only for capital purposes), such that we are not likely to be putting ourselves in jeopardy.

Selectman Firenze said that we have not decided that the level services budget is what we are going to the Town with – that is still an open issue. There was general agreement on this. The Board noted that the proposed Roads Stabilization Fund can and should be discussed without having to tie it to a particular bottom line.

Chairman Solomon stated that this discussion will be continued by the Board at its regular meeting on Monday evening and by the Board together with the Warrant Committee and the Capital Budget Committee on Wednesday night.

The Board adjourned the meeting at 12:57 PM.

Town Administrator

Thomas G. Younger